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Researching Let's Play gaming videos as game environment

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Let's Plays, as a specific form of gaming videos, are a rather new phenomenon and it is not surprising that they are still relatively under-researched. So far, only a few publications focus on the theme. Economic aspects of YouTube Let's Plays have been discussed by Postigo (2016), and Sjöblom and Hamari (2016) have published their research on the motivation of people watching gaming videos on Twitch. In 2017, the Well Played Journal published its first ever video edition, which is a special Let's Play video issue (Wolfenstein, Davidson et al. 2017). Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler (2015) discuss Let's Plays from a viewpoint of methodologies, namely, they propose a set of methodical steps for context analysis of Let's Plays. The first detailed publication on Let's Plays as research objects is Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler (2014) who define Let's Plays as "One new 'environment' of games are the so-called 'Let's Plays' – increasingly and widely popular self-recorded gaming videos" (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler (2014: 17).

Today, YouTube is the major platform where Let's Plays are shared (though they are also found on other platforms like Twitch) – and they are shared widely, with popularity and numbers rapidly increasing during the past few years. As such, they constitute a new research field in the study of games and gaming, and offer new and extensive data. The most prominent Let's Player worldwide, PewDiePie, in November 2017 had more than 57 million subscribers to his channel on YouTube, and each of his uploaded Let's Plays is watched by up to 22 million people. With such numbers in mind it is not surprising that Let's Plays have also become a serious economic factor, in the gaming industry and beyond.

The specifics of Let's Play gaming videos make them an unparalleled object of research, for possibly primarily game studies and digital humanities, but for disciplines like religious studies, media and communication studies or area and cultural studies as well. One characteristic feature is that they are not only watched by many people but also commented on. To not only watch a Let's Play passively but to actively (and publicly) comment on various aspects of an uploaded gaming video seems to be considered an important part of the 'Let's-Play-experience' by many, as the vast amount of comments prove. The comments sections may include many tens of thousands of comments for one single Let's Play. This allows researchers to clearly identify what actors discuss and what they find noteworthy, that is they enable direct and unfiltered access to their opinions.

The vast number and various content of comments on Let's Plays additionally reveal that they are massively and in many cases regularly watched and commented on by actors who do not necessarily play games themselves. Thus, Let's Plays allow extending the research and analysis of video games beyond the so far dominant research. Not only do Let's Plays shift the focus from game to gamers, i.e. to persons who play a game, record this process as a gaming video and share the latter on public platforms as a Let's Play, but also they shift the focus to a broad pool of persons in the vicinity of games which extends beyond the gamers only, i.e. to persons who might or might not play games themselves but who watch and comment Let's Plays, and are connected to gaming cultures via these practices.

Another noteworthy characteristic of Let's Plays is their inherent global character. They are produced, uploaded and commented in basically all world regions and many languages. Apart from English which still is the main language also European languages like German, or Asian languages like Japanese and Korean catch up.

When summarizing all the distinctive features of Let's Plays it becomes clear that they are a research object which opens a new vast pool of information in the vicinity of video games – in the so-called *gamevironments*. The theoretical and methodical approach of the same name and literally merging the terms “games/gaming” – “environments” is first mentioned and discussed by Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014 who argue to broaden the study of video games, gaming and culture beyond media-centred approaches. Namely, the concept was developed to better highlight recipient perspectives and actor-centred research which reaches beyond researching active gamers only to “all gamers and people interested in games” (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014: 11). *Gamevironments* thus builds on the social-constructivist mediatization approach (e.g. Couldry and Hepp 2016, Krotz 2008) and puts the spotlight on actors in their mediatized – and specifically gametized – life, and as an actor-centred theoretical and analytical concept “maintains the cultural, theological and social aspects of game content and still takes the performative aspects and ludic interaction into account” (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014:8).

Gamevironments consists of both, the technical and cultural environments of video games and gaming. It may include e.g. in-game performance or production and design of a game from the technical environments as much as e.g. the social and political context from the cultural environments – to name just a few aspects. As such, it combines the “analysis of video games as digital artefacts with the broader cultural and social context in which these games are produced and consumed” (Zeiler 2018) and argues for studying the cultural and social impact and implications of games and gaming as practice.

In accentuating the cultural environment of games, the concept of *gamevironments* additionally highlights the importance of acknowledging the global aspects of games and gaming. It is important to ascertain “whether these gaming processes are the same worldwide, or

whether there are different criteria for designing, experiencing, valuing and presenting games and gamer-generated content in different regional settings” (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014: 15). By broadening the research of games and gaming beyond (“Western”, e.g. European and American) cultural and regional contexts that currently still dominate it will not only be possible to widen the general lens in the study of games and gaming but also to establish and maintain a critical dialogue with studies based on research material and discussions of the steadily increasing landscape of video games’ and gaming’s global aspects.

The online journal titled *gamevironments* (www.gameenvironments.org) builds on this very approach. Since the inauguration issue in 2014 it aims at establishing and fostering a platform for the specific academic discourse around both established approaches to and new frontiers of researching video games and gaming as related to religion, culture, and society. *Gameenvironments* is an international and multidisciplinary collaboration of the two editors-in-chief, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler from the University of Bremen in Germany and Xenia Zeiler from the University of Helsinki in Finland. The journal publishes two issues annually, one regular issue in summer and one special thematic issue in winter, and includes a range of formats beyond regular articles, such as interviews, game or book reviews and research reports. Submissions are always welcome!

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